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AUTHOR Rendon, Laura I.
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ABSTRACT

This study assessed how in- and out-of-class experiences influenced diverse students' learning and development in college. The study took place at two community colleges, one with a predominant minority group of Hispanics, the other with a large African American minority group. There researchers conducted focus groups with 3-6 students per group with a total of 49 students. Interviews were transcribed, initial impressions and themes were catalogued using HyperQual, and data were analyzed with inductive methods. The study concluded that validation and community experiences are prerequisites, not outcomes, of student development. Validation may be the missing link to student involvement, may be able to overcome the effects of part-time interaction with the institution, may be key to facilitating talent development, may be about making students stronger, and may lead to the transformation of students who initially believe they will not be successful. In addition, transformed students believe in their inherent capacity to learn and become excited about learning. Colleges structured for white, traditional student populations need to be concerned with what the institution can do to promote involvement. (JB)

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Transforming At-Risk Students Into Powerful Learners

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by

Dr. Laura I. Rendón, Senior Researcher
Romero Jalomo, Jr., Research Assistant

Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85287-2411

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Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess how in- and out-of-class experiences influenced culturally diverse students' learning and development.

- Who or what was influencing students to believe in their innate capacity to learn?
- How did in- and out-of-class experiences affect student learning, self-concept, connections to the institution and relationships with family and friends?

The Involvement Theory

Two of the basic tenets of the involvement theory suggest:

- The more a student invests physical and psychological energy in the academic experience, the greater the potential for talent development.
- The transition to college is maximized when students make connections in college; for example:

  -- doing academic work

  -- participating in extracurricular activities

  -- interacting with faculty and college staff

Astin, 1985

Research Design

- Qualitative design

  -- two colleges: Southeastern, located in a thriving suburb of a southern state and West Coast, located in a metropolitan area in a large western state. Both campuses were multicultural in nature, with the predominant minority group at Southeastern being African American and at West Coast, Hispanic

  -- researchers met with each college president and campus contact person to explain the qualitative nature of the study and the need to interview students in a focus group setting

- Focus group interviews: (3-6 students per group)

  -- guiding concern was to select participants who would be proportionately representative of the new student population on campus. Thus, no attempt was made to select random samples of students on either campus.

  -- 49 community college students interviewed

  -- criteria used for selection:

    * first-year students completing first semester of college

    * groups included men and women who were White, African American, Hispanic and Asian

- All interviews were tape recorded

Respondents

Southeastern Student Participants
n=25

Race / Ethnicity	Female	Male	Racial Totals
African American	13	5	18
White (non-Hispanic)	2	4	6
Hispanic	0	1	1
Gender Totals	15	10	25

West Coast Student Participants
n=24

Race / Ethnicity	Female	Male	Racial Totals
African American	0	1	1
Asian	1	2	3
White (non-Hispanic)	2	1	3
Hispanic	6	11	17
Gender Totals	9	15	24

Data Analysis

- Transcribed interviews yielded approximately 300+ single-spaced pages of data for both colleges
- Initial impressions and themes catalogued used HyperQual
- During the analysis phase, the data were further "pseudo-filtered" paying particular attention to student involvement and transition patters
- Data were analyzed using an inductive approach

Theme 1. The Nature of Community College Students

- Were diverse, not only culturally, but in terms of life backgrounds and what they expected from college.
- Had set high aspirations.
- Majority were first generation, especially Hispanics and African Americans.
- Confronting out-of-class obstacles, such as:
  - -- working full or part-time
  - -- undergoing physical rehabilitation
  - -- experiencing financial difficulties
- Low expectations had been set for many
- Many came from communities where higher education was not a priority.
- Their life experiences were sometimes discounted in college.
- Expected faculty to understand their difficulties to help them learn.
- Yearned for understanding, acceptance and recognition that there was something they knew that was worthwhile.
- Wanted faculty to understand they had come a long way to become mature adults who had learned from their past experiences.
- Expressed a need for structure and direction.

The Nature of Community College Students

Several of these students came from communities where the idea of going to college was not a priority. An Hispanic male at West Coast said:

> The problem is [that] a lot of people have to recognize that we're coming from a community where education isn't a priority... I always imagined that I could never get into UCLA or Berkeley. That wasn't possible for me because I had always been told that I was never going to make it in life, that I should just join the army or something like that. School wasn't for me [because] a lot of people never took time...[After] I got to [West Coast] I dropped out [for] two semesters in a row...It wasn't because I was stupid, but because I had no sense of direction and also I didn't know what to expect from college because I've never been taught what to expect from college...

Students at both campuses also expressed a need for structure and direction. An African American woman at Southeastern explains this view:

> I find that a student, [a] freshman coming to college right out of high school, I find that there's no sense of direction. There's no one here, or at least there wasn't [anyone here] for me. [For example] when a student sits down and says, "Well, I'm not certain of what curriculum I want, what classes I need to be taking, how should I go about registration [or] how should I go about financial aid?" An academic life is much different than that of life at home or in the business world. So sometimes terms are not familiar to you.

Theme 2. The Role of Validation

- Students went through a wide range of experiences ranging from invalidation to validation that were provided by in- and out-of-class agents such as faculty, friends and relatives.
- Examples of invalidation:
  - -- Faculty and Staff who discount life experiences
  - -- Faculty who appear not to care
  - -- Friends who tease students about not attending a "real college"
- Examples of validation:
  - -- Faculty who work closely with students and push them to excel
  - -- Faculty who encourage students to work together and help each other
  - -- Faculty who treat students as equals and respect students
  - -- Supportive faculty
- **Validation appeared to transform "at-risk" students into powerful learners--helping students to believe in their ability to learn, become excited about learning, become motivated to succeed against all odds, feel that they were learning something meaningful and feel they were cared about as a person, not as a student.**

Invalidating Experiences

At one end of the continuum of community college experiences was invalidation--actions that reinforced doubts, made students feel stupid or incapable of doing college-level work, and/or discouraged students from performing at their best. An Hispanic male related an invalidating experience with faculty members at West Coast:

> None of my teachers [at West Coast] ever seemed to care. One time I had to drop a class because [when] I asked for help racquetball was more important for that person than to help me, although it was his office hours. I [said] "You know I need help." And I really felt that I could have made it through that class had he helped me through the chapter, because I had an "A" on my first two tests... And being a *green* kid he [said], "Don't worry about it, you're going to make it through." I [said], "No, I just don't want to make it through, I want to know what I'm reading and understand it."

An African American woman at Southeastern recalled an out-of-class experience, which serves as an example of how some students acquire knowledge outside of class only to have that life experience discounted:

> I went to a secretarial school and I started working on Wall Street for an investment firm. I went in as a file clerk. Climbing up the ladder up there is very easy, all you have to have is personality, a little charm. And within about two or three years, I was making my $35,000-$40,000 a year...I've always been quick on my feet. So it was nothing for me to excel in New York...People are willing to teach you...But when I came to [Southeastern] I was made to realize that I was a young Black woman with hardly any education...I was used to working with people who made big money and they trusted me with decisions. [Sometimes] people would call in for brokers and the broker was not there. If the client had money invested in a particular stock even though I was not a broker I could go in and transfer or give them a piece of IBM or AT&T. So...to come to [the college where she worked] and have someone speak to me as if I had the education of a five year old...that was a real bummer.

Validating Experiences

One of the most significant findings in this study was that in- and out-of-class agents played an important role in transforming students through the use of validation--actions that made students believe they were capable of learning, helped students experience a feeling of self-worth and allowed students to believe that what they brought to the college experience was worthwhile and valuable.

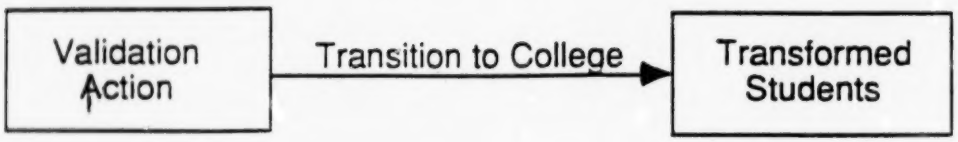
A female at Southeastern described an in-class validating experience that validated her belief that she could be successful:

> One thing that impressed me most was that these people [Southeastern faculty], no matter what age, no matter what color, no matter what their nationality, they encouraged everybody to continue their education, and they don't have any barriers...when it comes down to what you want to do, if you want to sit at home for the rest of your life and be a homemaker or if you want to become the president of the United States, they encourage you in every way possible.

When students talked about faculty who encouraged them, they spoke with excitement and motivation to learn. A woman at Southeastern said:

> I had a computer instructor who is wonderful. He said one thing in class that really put me at ease because I've never looked at a computer for more than ten minutes before I took this class, and he said, "We're not here to try and get the 'A'. We're here to learn. As long as I feel that you're doing the best you can, you'll pass my course. If you feel you're making progress and that you're learning the basics, you'll pass my course." It really puts a lot of people at ease. Like I said I've been a long time out of school and it was scary for me coming back, but I've had a lot of encouragement from all of my instructors. That's the most important thing, they encourage you.

The Impact of Validation



Transformational Changes:

- Believe "I can do it"
- Believe in inherent capacity to learn
- Become excited about learning
- Feel a part of the learning community
- Become motivated or driven
- Feel cared about as a person, not just as a student

Theme 3. The Influence of Powerful Learning Experiences

- Most powerful learning experiences occurred out-of-college and ranged from positive to negative.
- For these students, powerful learning reflected the voice of experience that transcended academic learning.
- Examples of powerful learning:
  - -- Learning the value of a college education from a father who dropped out of high school
  - -- Learning the importance of a college education from a job experience that involved lifting refrigerators
  - -- Learning to master the college English curriculum from a ninth grade English teacher.
- Students were coming to college not as empty receptacles, but as individuals with a reservoir of knowledge that was often not accounted for in class.

The Influence of Powerful Learning Experiences

When students were asked to name their most powerful learning experience they almost always named something that happened out-of-class. Powerful learning experiences tended to provide the motivation for learning and validated students. One student recounted an out-of-class learning experience by saying:

> My ninth grade English teacher, she was wonderful. I have never had any teacher, anywhere, who had more enthusiasm for her subject and her teaching. She was the only teacher that I had in public school that seemed to really respect students and try to understand them... [When] I came to this school and took English 151, [I had a] very tough teacher. [On] my very first paper I got an A on it and I did that based on what she taught me in ninth grade. What she taught me was perfect and it was a skill that I would keep using. You know, she was just very sensitive to what we needed and the students responded to seeing someone who cared that much about what they were doing.

An African American male at Southeastern describes a powerful learning experience:

> My grandpa used to tell me something, he would pull [at] me to get me to do what I had to do. He would say, "You can't do it." I would say, "I can't? Since when -- who are you to say I can't?" And since then, I guess, that's when I read things and understood that Black people can do this or they can't. I've heard that before. I'm out to prove that everything is wrong. I'm trying to prove [the] statistics wrong. I'm trying to prove [to] people who feel that our race is going down, Black males are going down, [that] I'm not going to have that. I would not allow that as long as I am on this earth and I thank God for pulling me because I could have followed those other people which are the drug dealers and cocaine users or whatnot, but I decided not to.

Theme 4. Negotiating Institutional Life

- Making successful transition to college necessitates getting involved in institutional life.
- Non-traditional students are not likely to get involved on their own.
- **Characteristics of students who find it difficult to get involved:**

Students who have been out of school for some time

Students who are afraid of failure

Students who are afraid of a new culture

Students who dropped out of high school

Students who did poorly in high school or were placed in "slow" classes

Single and married students

Physically disabled students

Students who feel out of place in a new environment

Students who have self-doubts, who feel incapable of learning

Those who have been "off the track of life"

Apprehensive and immature students

Those who take evening courses when no services are available

Students who never liked high school or who were rebellious in high school

Introverted students who find it hard to make friends

Students who have accomplished little on their own, or who had much done for them

Those who have unclear goals, feel lost, or don't know what questions to ask

Problems Negotiating Institutional Life

Making a successful transition to college necessitates getting involved in institutional life. However, getting involved for most students we interviewed was not easy. Not all students, especially those who find the transition to college difficult and those who are unaccustomed to active participation in the academic and social culture¡ can involve themselves easily in college. One student at Southeastern explained her perception of getting involved:

> I had never accomplished anything on my own. I went straight from living in my parent's house, being taken care of by my parents, [to being] married, taken care of by my husband. I just felt like I had never really done anything on my own before and its like this [attending college] is the first thing that I'm doing.

Merely offering opportunities for involvement did not seem to fulfill the need for mentoring for an African American woman at Southeast:

> But is it [mentoring] accessible? I'm not trying to argue the point. It is in place and I'm glad to know that it is in place. But several things can be in place but if a person's not accessible, if they're hard to get to, if people do not welcome being approached, this makes it hard. And my [concern] is that, what about freshmen just entering the academic world?

Conclusions

- Given that higher education is likely to get more, not less nontraditional students, it is important that researchers and practitioners design studies and practices with a full understanding of the issues students bring to college.

- Validation and community are prerequisites, as opposed to outcomes of student development.

  -- validate early
  -- validate often

- Validation may

  -- be the "missing link" to student involvement

  -- be able to overcome the effects of part-time interaction with institution

  -- be key to facilitating talent development (along with involvement)

  -- be about making students stronger

  -- lead to the transformation of students who initially believe they will be unsuccessful.

- Transformed students began to believe in their inherent capacity to learn, to become excited about learning, to be motivated and driven to succeed, to feel that what they knew was important and valuable, and to feel cared about as a person, not just as a student.

- "Field of Dreams" mentality: "If you build it, they will come" does not appear to work for non-traditional students.

- Colleges, which for the most part are structured for white, traditional student populations, need to be concerned not only with what students do to get involved, but with what institutions can do to promote involvement.

Fostering A Validating Classroom

ACADEMIC INVALIDATING MODEL

1. Students treated as empty receptacles and/or as incapable of learning.
2. Students expected to disconnect with the past.
3. Faculty assault students with information and/or withhold information
4. Faculty instill doubt and fear in students.
5. Faculty are experts, the sole source of truth and authority.
6. Students are oppressed, silenced and cast in subordinate roles.
7. Faculty focus on abstract thinking.
8. Students are passive.

ACADEMIC VALIDATING MODEL

1. Students bring rich reservoir of experience and are motivated to believe they are capable of learning.
2. The past is a source of strength and knowledge.
3. Faculty share knowledge with students and support students in learning.
4. Faculty structure learning so that students are able to see themselves as powerful learners.
5. Faculty are partners in learning with students.
6. Students are allowed to have a public voice and share their ideas openly.
7. Faculty recognize the importance of experience as a base of knowledge and that out-of-class learning is equally powerful.
8. Faculty employ active learning techniques such as collaborative learning, demonstrations, simulations, field trips etc.

Fostering A Validating Classroom

ACADEMIC INVALIDATING MODEL

9. Evaluation instills fear and is objective and impersonal.

10. Faculty and students remain separated.

11. The classroom is fiercely competitive.

12. Fear of failure permeates the classroom environment.

13. Teaching is linear, flowing only from teacher to student.

14. Students validated at the end of the term.

15. The core curriculum is male-centered and Euro-centered.

16. Students encouraged to give automated and rote responses.

ACADEMIC VALIDATING MODEL

9. Learning standards are designed in collaboration with students and students are allowed to re-do assignments until they master them. Faculty praise success and encourage motivation.

10. Faculty meet with students in-and-out-of-class, serve as mentors for students, as well as encouarge and support them.

11. Students work together in teams and are encouraged to share information.

12. A climate of success is fostered by faculty and students.

13. Teachers may be learners; learners may be teachers.

14. Students validated early and validation continues throughout college years.

15. The core curriculum is inclusive of the contributions of women and minorities.

16. Learning allows for reflection, multi-perspectives and imperfection.

Fostering A Therapeutic Learning Community

INTERPERSONAL INVALIDATING MODEL

1. Students expected to get involved in institutional life on their own.
2. Cliques/exclusive groups are allowed to form.
3. The college climate is perceived as sexist, racist and/or intolerant of certain students.
4. The college climate is cold and insensitive.
5. Students are expected to shed their culture.
6. Few opportunities are available for out-of-class involvement.
7. Students feel stressed, unable to make decisions.
8. Students feel isolated.
9. Students feel unloved and unsupported.

INTERPERSONAL VALIDATING MODEL

1. Faculty and staff actively reach out to students to help them get involved in college.
2. All students considered important and equal. Student organizations and activities are open to all groups.
3. The college promotes pride in cultural, gender and sexual orientation through college sponsored activities and organizations.
4. Faculty and staff are available to students in-and-out of class.
5. Cultural pride is recognized and fostered in- and out-of-class.
6. Faculty and staff meet with students at athletic events, in cafeterias, patio areas, in tutoring centers, in the library, etc.
7. Counselors meet with students, to teach them stress management, decision-making techniques, and college coping skills.
8. Students encouraged to help each other, i.e. providing positive reinforcement, forming friends during orientation, living with and interacting with peers.
9. Events that bring families together with students, such as achievement nights, athletic events, etc., are held throughout the year.